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ZIONISM:

A STATEMENT

By Solomon Schechter, M. A., D. Litt.



REPRINTED FROM
THE AMERICAN HEBREW
December 28th 1906
By the Federation of American Zionists

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THERE is a story told of a German Jew of the older generation that when his friends came to him about the beginning of the "eighties" of the last century, and asked what he thought of these *new* attacks on the Jews, he looked rather astonished, and said, "They are not new; they are the old ones." I may say with equal justice that the attacks on Zionism which have come lately from press and pulpit, are not new. They have been repeated ever so many times, and have been as often repeated. Lest, however, my ignoring direct challenges would, in accordance with the old rule, "Silence is tantamount to admission," be taken as a proof that I have at last become converted by the arguments of our opponents, I will state here clearly the reasons for my allegiance to Zionism. I wish only to premise that I am no official expounder of Zionism. I am not claiming or aspiring to the role of leadership in this movement. The following remarks have only the value of representing the opinion of one of the rank and file, stating clearly his attitude towards this movement, though he believes that he reflects the views of a great number of fellow Zionists.

Zionism is an ideal, and as such is indefinable. It is thus subject to various interpretations and susceptible of different aspects. It may appear to one as the rebirth of national Jewish consciousness, to another as a religious revival, whilst to a third it may present itself as a path leading to the goal of Jewish culture; and to a fourth it

may take the form of the last and only solution of the Jewish problem. By reason of this variety of aspects, Zionism has been able to unite on its platform the most heterogeneous elements; representing Jews of all countries, and exhibiting almost all the different types of culture and thought as only a really great and universal movement could do. That each of its representatives should emphasize the particular aspect most congenial to his way of thinking, and most suitable for his mode of action, is only natural. On one point, however, they all agree, namely, that it is not only desirable, but absolutely necessary that Palestine, the land of our fathers, should be recovered with the purpose of forming a home for at least a portion of the Jews, who would lead there an independent national life. That the language of the leaders was sometimes ambiguous and not quite definite in the declaration of this principle, is owing to the boldness of the proposition and the environments in which these leaders were brought up, where everything distinctly Jewish was in need of an apology, rather than to any doubt about the final aim of Zionism, as conceived in the minds of the great majority of Zionists. Nor was it strange that some backslidings should occur, and that in moments of despair, counsels of despair should prevail, considering the terrible crises through which we have passed during the last few years. The great majority of Zionists remain loyal to the great idea of Zion and Jerusalem, to which history and tradition, and the general Jewish sentiment, point. It is "God's country" in the fullest and truest sense of the words. It is the "Promised Land" still maintaining its place in every Jewish heart, excepting those, perhaps, with whom Jewish history commences about the year 1830, and Jewish literature is confined to the transactions of the Rabbinical

synods of the last century, and the files of Phillipson's *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*.

To me personally, after long hesitation and careful watching, Zionism recommended itself as the great bulwark against assimilation. By assimilation, I do not understand what is usually understood by Americanization: namely, that every Jew should do his best to acquire the English language; that he should study American history and make himself acquainted with the best productions of American literature; that he should be a law-abiding citizen, thoroughly appreciating the privilege of being a member of this great commonwealth, and joyfully prepared to discharge the duties of American citizenship. What I understand by assimilation is loss of identity; or that process of disintegration which, passing through various degrees of defiance of all Jewish thought and of disloyalty to Israel's history and its mission, terminates variously in different lands. In Germany, for instance, (where the pressure from above in favor of the dominant religion is very strong), it ends in direct and public apostasy; in other countries where this pressure has been removed, it results in the severance of all affiliation with the synagogue; and is followed by a sort of "eclectic religiosity," that coquettes with the various churches, not neglecting even the Christian Science Temple, and is consummated by a final, though imperceptible absorption in the great majority. This consummation will surely be hastened by the gradual disappearance of social disparity. What this process finally means for Judaism will perhaps be best seen from the following quotation from Wellhausen's "History of Israel." After giving Spinoza's oft-quoted view regarding the possibilities of the absorption of Israel by its surroundings, the well-known Bible critic remarks: "The persistency of the race may of course prove a

harder thing to overcome than Spinoza has supposed; but, nevertheless, he will be found to have spoken truly in declaring that the so-called emancipation of the Jews must inevitably lead to the extinction of Judaism wherever the process is extended beyond the political to the social sphere."

The only comfort that Wellhausen leaves us is that "for the accomplishment of this, centuries may be required." We, and the few generations that are to succeed us, are to cheerfully abide in this intermediate condition, and to acquiesce in the tortures of a slow death; or, as the great Alexandrian sage in his description of the punishment awaiting the specially wicked expresses it, we are "to live continually dying," and to endure an unceasing dissolution until death will have mercy upon us and will give us the last *coup de grace*.

It is this kind of assimilation, with the terrible consequences indicated, that I dread most; even more than pogroms. To this form of assimilation, Zionism in the sense defined will prove, and is already proving, a most wholesome check. Whatever faults may be found with its real or self-appointed leaders, Zionism as a whole forms an opposing force against the conception of the destiny of Israel and the interpretation of its mission, the leading thought of which is apparently the well known epigram, "Whosoever shall seek to gain his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." Zionism declares boldly to the world that Judaism means to preserve its life by *not* losing its life. It shall be a true and healthy life, with a polity of its own, a religion wholly its own, invigorated by sacred memories and sacred environments, and proving a tower of strength and of unity not only for the remnant gathered within the borders of the Holy Land, but also for

those who shall, by choice or necessity, prefer what now constitutes the Galuth.

The term Galuth is here loosely used, expressing as I have often heard it, the despair and helplessness felt in the presence of a great tragedy. And the tragedy is not imaginary. It is real, and it exists everywhere. *It is* a tragedy to see a great ancient people, distinguished for its loyalty to its religion, and its devotion to its sacred law, losing thousands every year by the mere process of attrition. *It is* a tragedy to see sacred institutions as ancient as the mountains, to maintain which Israel for thousands of years shrank from no sacrifice, destroyed before our very eyes and exchanged for corresponding institutions borrowed from hostile religions. *It is* a tragedy to see a language held sacred by all the world, in which Holy Writ was composed, and which served as the depository of Israel's greatest and best thought, doomed to oblivion and forced out gradually from the synagogue. *It is* a tragedy to see the descendants of those who revealed revelation to the world and who developed the greatest religious literature in existence, so little familiar with real Jewish thought, and so utterly wanting in all sympathy with it, that they have no other interpretation to offer of Israel's scriptures, Israel's religion, and Israel's ideals and aspirations and hopes, than those suggested by their natural opponents, slavishly following their opinions, copying their phrases, repeating their catchwords, not sparing us even the taunt of tribalism and Orientalism. I am not accusing anybody. I am only stating facts that are the outcome of causes under which we all labor, but for none of which any party in particular can be made responsible, though it cannot be denied that some among us rather made too much virtue of a necessity, and indulged, and are still indulging in experiments in euthanasia. The eco-

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nomic conditions under which we live; the innate desire for comfort; the inherent tendency towards imitation; the natural desire not to appear peculiar; the accessibility of theological systems, possessing all the seductions of "newness and modernity," patronized by fashion and even by potentates, and taught in ever so many universities, and condensed in dozens of encyclopedias, are sufficient and weighty enough causes to account for our tragedy. But, however natural the causes may be, they do not alter the doom. The effects are bound to be fatal. The fact thus remains that we are helpless spectators in the face of great tragedies, in other words, that we are in Galuth. This may not be the Galuth of the Jews, but it is the Galuth of Judaism, or, as certain mystics expressed it, the Galuth of *Hannephesh*, the Galuth of the Jewish soul wasting away before our very eyes. With a little modification we might repeat here the words of a Jewish Hellenist of the second century who, in his grief, exclaims: "Wherefore is Israel given up as a reproach to the heathen, and for what cause is the people whom thou best loved given over unto ungodly nations, and why is the law of our forefathers brought to naught, and the written covenants come to none effect? And we pass away out of the world as grasshoppers, and our life is astonishment and fear, and we are not worthy to obtain mercy."

The foregoing remarks have made it clear that I belong to that class of Zionists that lay more stress on the religious-national aspects of Zionism than on any other feature peculiar to it. The rebirth of Israel's national consciousness, and the revival of Israel's religion, or, to use a shorter term, the revival of Judaism, are inseparable. When Israel found itself, it found its God. When Israel lost itself, or began to work at its self-effacement, it was sure to deny its God. The selection of Israel, the

indestructibility of God's covenant with Israel, the immortality of Israel as a nation, and the final restoration of Israel to Palestine, where the nation will live a holy life on holy ground, with all the wide-reaching consequences of the conversion of humanity and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth—all these are the common ideals and the common ideas that permeate the whole of Jewish literature extending over nearly four thousand years, including the largest bulk of the Hellenistic portion of it. The universalistic passages in the Scripture usually paraded by the "prophetic Jew" as implying the final disappearance, or extinction of Israel, are in every case misquotations torn from their context, or ignoring other utterances by the same prophet. He

"boldly pilfers from the Pentateuch:

And, undisturbed by conscientious qualms,

Perverts the Prophets, and purloins the Psalms."

The interpretations smuggled into the passages are just as false and unscientific as the well-known Christological passages extracted from the Old Testament, and even from the Talmud, to be met with in missionary tracts, composed especially for the benefit of fresh converts.

The reproach that Zionism is unspiritual is meaningless. Indeed, there seems to be a notion abroad that spirituality is a negative quality. Take any ideal, and translate it into action, any sentiment of reverence, and piety, and give it expression through a symbol or ceremony, speak of the human yearning after communion with God, and try to realize it through actual prayer, and you will be at once denounced as unspiritual. However, the imputation is as old as the days when the name Pharisee became a reproach, and it is not to be expected that the Zionists would be spared it. In general, it is the Antinomian who will tell you that he is the only heir

to the rare quality of spirituality, whereas the real saint is in all his actions so spontaneous and so natural that he is entirely unconscious of possessing spirituality, and practically never mentions it.

The Zionists are no saints, but they may fairly claim that few movements are more free from the considerations of convenience and comfort, and less tainted with worldliness and other worldliness than the one which they serve. Nothing was to be gained by joining it. All the powers that be, were, and still are, opposed to it, whether in their capacity as individuals or as wealthy corporations. The Zionists are just beginning to be tolerated, but I remember distinctly the time when adhesion to the cause of Zionism might interfere with the prospects of a man's career, the cry being, "no Zionists need apply." The classes from which the Zionists were recruited were mostly the poorest among the poor. College men and university men, more blessed with enthusiasm and idealism than with the goods of this world, also furnished a fair quota. But this lack of means did not prevent them from responding most generously to every appeal made on behalf of the cause. They taxed themselves to the utmost of their capacity, and beyond. I myself have witnessed cases in which men and women joyfully contribute their last earnings, foregoing their summer vacations, for which they had been saving a whole year.

The activity of Zionism must not be judged by what it has accomplished *in* Zion and Jerusalem—where it has to deal with political problems as yet not ripe for solution—but by what it has thus far achieved *for* Zion and Jerusalem, through the awakening of the national Jewish consciousness, notwithstanding the systematic and ruthless efforts made in the opposite direction during the greater part of the last century. Our synagogues

and our homes show plainly the effect. Zion and Jerusalem have not even been allowed to stand as a sad, glorious remembrance of a past, as mere objects of pious sentiment. Indeed, the astounding discovery was made that far from a day of disaster, the Ninth of Ab has to be looked upon as a day of liberation, when Judaism threw off the shackles of nationalism to congeal into a mere Church—with a ritual and a body of doctrines to be promulgated some nineteen hundred years later. Unfortunately, Israel was smitten with blindness, failing to understand its real destiny, and in the perversion of its heart, for eighteen hundred years observed the Ninth of Ab as a day of mourning and weeping, of humiliation and fasting, thus wilfully delaying its redemption. And I have always wondered that the Church was not yet enterprising enough to put up a statue in gratitude to its benefactor Titus, the *delectus generis humani*, representing the goddess *Universa*, with a scribe and a priest cowering in chains at her feet.

The work, accordingly, in which Zionism had to engage first, and in which it will have to continue for many years to come, was the work of regeneration. It had to re-create the Jewish consciousness before creating the Jewish state. In this respect, Zionism has already achieved great things. There is hardly a single Jewish community in any part of the globe which is not represented by a larger or smaller number of men and women acknowledging themselves as Zionists and standing out as a living protest against the tendencies just hinted at. It has created a press, and has called into life a host of lecturers and speakers propagating its doctrines and preaching them boldly to Israel all over the world. It has given to the world Asher Ginzberg, or, as he is better known, by the pen name of Achad Ha-am, one of our finest intellects and most original thinkers; and he is fol-

lowed by a whole host of disciples, all of them working under the stimulus of the Jewish national ideal, much as they may differ in the Zionistic aspects they may happen to emphasize. It has enriched our literature with a large number of novels and lyrics, and even distinct Zionist melodies are not wanting. It has further called into existence numerous societies, whose aim it is to make the sacred tongue a living language by means of writing and even conversing in it, while in several communities, special schools have been established with **the** same end in view. To better advance this end, a whole series of Hebrew primers, grammars, and reading books for the young have been produced. Several translations prepared from German, French and English works bearing on Jewish history and cognate subjects, all of them calculate to strengthen religious-national consciousness, have also appeared under the inspiration of Zionism. Foremost of all, Zionism has succeeded in bringing back into the fold many men and women, both here and in Europe, who otherwise would have been lost to Judaism. It has given them a new interest in the synagogue and everything Jewish, and put before them an ideal worthy of their love and their sacrifice. Cases have come under my notice where Jewish college men, at a comparatively advanced age, began to study the sacred language and to repair to the synagogue, sharing both in its joys and in its griefs, some among them encountering the displeasure and ridicule of their relatives, who were fanatical assimilators and who bring up their children without religious education of any kind. Of course, back-slidings and relapses will occur; but it is an advantage to Zionism that in its present condition, at least, it is all sacrifice and no gain. It holds out no prospect to the ambitious and to "those who exalt themselves to establish the vision" of a Jewish state without Jewish memories.

without historic foundation and without traditional principles. The undesirables and the impatient will thus, under one pretense or another, leave it soon and indeed are dropping out already, so that its purification of all alloy and discordant elements is only a question of a very short time.

The taunt of retrogression and reaction has no terrors for us. To insist on progressing when one has come to the conclusion that a step forward means ruin, is sheer obstinacy. Unless we are convinced so deeply of our infallibility that we take every utterance of ours as a divine revelation, and our every action as a precedent and a tradition, there may come a time in our lives when we may have to return. As a fact, Zionism is the natural rebound from an artificial and overstrained condition of things which could no longer last. It is the Declaration of Jewish Independence from all kinds of slavery, whether material or spiritual. It is as natural and instinctive as life itself, and no amount of scolding and abuse will prevent the re-assertion of the Jewish soul which in our unconscious Zionism is an actual present-day experience, though the expression given to it takes different shape in different minds. Moreover, Zionism thoroughly believes in progress and development; but it must be progress along Jewish lines, and the goal to be reached must be the Jewish historic ideal.

But, whilst Zionism is constantly winning souls for the present, it is at the same time preparing for us the future, which will be a Jewish future. Only then, when Judaism has found itself, when the Jewish soul has been redeemed from the Galuth, can Judaism hope to resume its mission to the world. Everybody whose view has not been narrowed by the blinkers imposed on him by his little wing or by party considerations, knows well that it is not only traditional religion which is on trial. We are

on a veritable volcano created by the upheavals of the newest methods of "searching research," which respects as little the new formulae, such as the categoric imperative, conscience, the notion of duty and the concept of morality and ethics, as it does creeds and dogmas. The disruption may come at any moment unless revelation is re-asserted. The declaration, *Freedom is our Messiah*, which I have so often heard, may be good Fourth of July oratory, but it is miserably bad theology, and worse philosophy, having in view the terrible woes and complicated problems besetting humanity. Now, what happened once may happen again, and Israel may another time be called upon with its mission to the nations. Under the present conditions, however, we have neither man takes this "mission" seriously in connection with modern Judaism, and the talk about it is allowed to be a mere *licencia predicatorum*. But we hope that the Bible, which influenced humanity so deeply and proved so largely instrumental in the partial conversion of the world, arose in Palestine or in circles which looked on Palestine as their home. Those who wrote the Bible moved and had their whole being in the religious national idea, and lived under the discipline of the Law. History may, and to my belief, will repeat itself, and Israel will be the chosen instrument of God for the new and final mission, but then Israel must first effect its own redemption and live again its own life, and be Israel again, to accomplish its universal mission. The passages in the Bible most distinguished for their universalistic tendency and grandeur, are, as is well known, the verses in Isaiah and Micah, Chapter IV, and there it is solemnly proclaimed: "Out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

Our sages have themselves given expression to this correspondence between the universalistic and the nationalistic elements in Judaism. A solemn declaration, thus they declare, has the Holy One, blessed be He, registered: "I will not enter the heavenly Jerusalem, until Israel shall come to the earthly Jerusalem." Not in conflict, but in consonance with Israel's establishment of the divine institutions in their full integrity in God's own land, will be the triumph in all its glory of the Kingdom of Heaven.

